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## THE ORGANIZATION OF THE COURSE IN LITERATURE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS<sup>1</sup>

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Now that the eastern universities are abandoning the system of examining on certain masterpieces, by which they had practically dictated to the secondary schools what should constitute the course of reading, and now that they are following the universities of the Middle West in leaving the secondary schools free to read what they will, when they will, and as they will, the movement will doubtless extend throughout the length and breadth of the land, and teachers of literature will have an opportunity to do their best in their teaching. As a sequel we shall soon be called upon to justify our freedom by improvement in the output from our schools. It behooves us, therefore, to consider betimes and to arrange our course to secure by proper economies and improved methods (1) better habits of work, (2) keener appreciation, and (3) consequent power of a superior order. We shall find, as do other business concerns when they reorganize, that by a little ingenuity and care we can conserve much that we are now wasting, and reap a rich percentage in by-products.

The National Conference on Uniform Entrance Requirements in English has advised us to organize our work, and thanks to the labors of the Conference for years past, we have never been in so favorable a state to attempt organization. First, we are accustomed to studying the masterpieces themselves instead of snatches from them and books about them, and we do not deaden the interest by too much biography and history, but enliven it by enough; second, we have a flexible list, offering more for the most fortunate and efficient schools, and requiring not too much from the least; third, we have on that list a goodly proportion of pieces that we

<sup>1</sup> Read before the National Council of Teachers of English, Chicago, December 1, 1911.

shall want to keep, though it needs revision to displace the less worthy pieces by selections that give literary types not now represented and that strengthen spots notably weak in our course. It is to be hoped that the Conference will continue its labors, especially if it is ready to adopt its own good advice, and will help to organize our course. It is to be hoped that a committee whose word carries weight will serve as an advisory board, if this present committee, as constituted, does not continue to serve. The old distinction between *reading* and *study* may well be dropped, for the "reading" should be done with creditable care, and sometimes with minuteness, but the term "study," as it is used here in contradistinction, is certain to continue the abuse of a deadening learning-for-its-own-sake. What need not be a vice in a professional scholar, and may be encouraged in the few members of the class to whom it is natural, is disastrous when imposed on all in the study of literature.

One of the weak spots that we recommend the Conference to strengthen is in the home reading. It is very desirable that habits of individual reading be fostered, and to this end it would be well to stimulate, and in some fashion to control, the reading of a list of modern books throughout the course. We wish to develop a habit of independent reading, not of required books (for all pupils of one grade have not the same likings or the same degree of proficiency in reading, and on these books little help will be given by discussions in class), but of a generous list of selections from what the children, or children of previous classes, have liked, along with other books that the teacher suggests. The privilege of substituting books that they have found worthy may well be accorded individuals and schools that labor under harder conditions than usual. In my own twelfth-grade classes the books that were reported range from Plato and *The History of Napoleon* down to Oliver Optic and Henty. If time is occasionally taken for each pupil to tell the class what he has read lately that he liked, the personal recommendation will do much to stimulate reading and to raise the quality of books read by the class, as well as to humanize the class and to secure a true social culture.

The purpose of our course, in literature as in composition, should be immediately practical, to teach a pupil to express the

ideas that come to him from the whole range of his experience. To that end it should aim to include all of the best types in prose and poetry—epic, lyric, drama, narrative, essay, oration—and in these the structural beauty and effectiveness of style should be noted, as well as the thought, or content. The best methods of narration, description, exposition, and argumentation should be seen as they occur in the masterpieces studied, and this study should be supplemented by exercises in composition aiming to give more knowledge, and practice in its use. A good textbook, if it is not abused, will add to the efficiency of this work. Until pupils have felt the beauty of the form in the best and most original types of literature, they will lack the best preparation to give fit form to their own ideas when occasion comes for them to express themselves. It is because this formal side of literature is so practically valuable, so essential in the teaching of composition, and because this side of the literature will be so much more carefully considered when composition is taught together with literature, that I should consider it a great mistake to separate high-school courses in composition and literature.

The less immediately practical purpose of the study of the content of literature is not the less valuable to the life of the student, for the body is more than raiment. By his reading he comes to appreciate and use a noble art; but also, traveling in the realms of gold under the sway of those kingly spirits, he widens his horizon and learns the distant and the past, whence he can return to understand and cherish the better all that is good in his present. If he reads aright, his spirit is roused from its passive state, and he enters into the life of his book for or against, as judge of its good and its evil. It will be observed that I am following Plato in considering the *goodness* of the pieces selected as their most important quality, though *beauty* is the quality to be sought most in the study of their form. Plato held that the purpose of telling children great stories was to make them "heroes" for the state; we are teaching our young people, by the moral and religious questions that they encounter in the best literature, to consider their duty as citizens in the Kingdom of God. How can *Macbeth* and *The Idylls of the King* be read without opening the eyes of the spirit to moral and

religious truths? Plato was doubtless too good an artist to want to preach stories (which usually hold their moral in solution), but he was an educational artist in selecting for his course the stories that had the right morals, "models of virtuous thought, picturing God as good, and heroes as good men." To multiply the strength of the impression, stories should be told also of men who break the moral law and are broken by it in turn. And modern children should have stories from the literature of the past, old pagan stories, like the *Odyssey*, to see what was beautiful and good in those times, but also what was not good as compared with the modern. Following these, they should have mediaeval ballads, romances, and tales, the best and the worst in chivalry as judged in the light of our ideals. Until they have read some of the literature of the past, they cannot appreciate the present justly, with its fruits of the struggle from pagan to Christian, from mediaeval to modern. In the elementary schools the reading is very largely from modern times; in the high school we should plan that a part of it shall be selected and ordered so as to widen the interests of the pupils and bring them into their heritage, the riches bequeathed the race by the ancestors, a knowledge of the ages that are past.

A lack of the sense of the past is one of the weak spots in American education, as compared with European, and this we should aim to strengthen if possible when we displace the less worthy pieces of literature from our list. It is said that more than other nations we turn our faces to the future, and it is a hopeful sign that we do so; but the past of every nation that composes our American race has riches of wisdom and beauty that should not be lost simply because the ancestors crossed an ocean. Far from having no legends and traditions, Americans have the right, by direct descent, to all that Europe has produced of heroic legend and tradition back to the dawn of time, and we should make certain that the children are not deprived of their heritage. In our continent of literature there should be no boundaries, and it would be folly to limit ourselves to the literature of any one European nation, particularly to take inferior pieces from that while we omit the best from the others. To be perfectly definite on this point, it would be well to change the title of our course to

*Literature and Composition* instead of *English*, which is a misleading term.

Has the time not come for us now to adopt consciously for our policy *the selection of the best from all of the sources*, so approving and continuing the wise tendency that Ticknor and Longfellow introduced at Harvard, and so securing among ourselves the most valuable knowledge, the finest literary sense, and the widest sympathies with all the sister-nations whose sons and daughters we are?

If we displace from our list the pieces that are second best, we can add within a few years in their place more of myth and mediaeval legend: (1) a piece of biography by Plutarch; (2) a translation of a Greek drama; (3) a northern saga, as *King Olaf*, from Longfellow or from the *Heimskringla*; (4) an animal epic, as *Reynard the Fox*; (5) some legends of the saints, as *St. George and the Dragon*; (6) incidents of the Crusaders at Jerusalem and Charlemagne's Peers in Spain; (7) examples of the extravagant in chivalry that show its decay, as *The Seven Champions of Christendom* and *Don Quixote*, which laughed decrepit chivalry out. By making the right selections we can give our pupils the source material on which to base their comparisons of the life and ideals in the different ages, and we can rouse a real and vital interest as compared with the interest that is given when they are asked to read books to be able to take an examination on them, to be intelligent on them, or even to enjoy their beauty.

Given a list of the best books suited to high-school pupils, chosen from ancient, mediaeval, and modern times and including all of the best types developed—epic, lyric, drama, essay, narrative—it is clear that we shall not secure the best results by running through our assortment in a haphazard fashion, or even by shifting empirically from place to place. By a haphazard order we can obtain at best a conglomerate, lacking in coherence and proportion and lacking in the interest and effectiveness which we wish to secure for each piece. We can secure greater interest in the *Bunker Hill Oration*, and greater effectiveness, if we do not read it just after the *Odyssey*, but after some piece that has a bond of connection with it. The necromancers and spirits of the *Faerie Queene* will be comprehended best by preceding them and following

them with the witches who tempted Macbeth, and by other stories of fairies, goblins, and ghosts that terrified the men of that time. These reinforce each other, and after enough of them have been read, the character of the period to which they belong will be clear, and a strong historical background will have been formed for the reading of any mediaeval literature that will be encountered later. This will give all of the knowledge of mediaeval times that some of the pupils acquire, for all do not take mediaeval history. We can arrange the order of the masterpieces so that they are of interest individually, but of greater interest and value as parts of a larger whole; so that they are apprehended in relation with other pieces of their time and school, but also, along with their school, in contrast to those that preceded and followed. When a pupil is taking a course he should not merely be wandering about in it, but he should know if possible from the beginning its aim and the final state that he is to attain. He should feel that he is making progress. When he has finished he should be able to look back over it with a sense not merely of certain authors who expressed certain ideas in certain form, but with a sense of differences in spirit, ideas, and form between the ancient, the mediaeval, and the modern; with a habit of looking for new forms as they appear; and even with an inkling that there is a logic in their evolution from the less to the more complex. Is it too much to try to teach him in literature as he is being taught in history, that through the ages an increasing purpose runs? If all of this can be done without increasing the work at present required, by merely organizing his reading course and asking questions and making comments by the way, is it not well worth the doing? Without this higher knowledge and this habit of comparison and relating all to life, our pupil will have on hand at the end of his course some assets (he can't help having some), but he will have also much that remains to him as dead learning—and a vice. He will probably have disliked his work, and will hold a lifelong grudge against the innocent masterpieces that he had to read in school. The pity of it!

From what I have said it is evident that I am for a logical and historical teaching of the masterpieces, primarily to secure the best condition for their study, the best understanding and appre-

ciation of their spirit, development, and form. A piece of literature is fashioned of the very blood and bone of its time and cannot be understood apart from the body to which it belonged.

The next principle to observe in organization is that the periods and schools should be approached consecutively in point of time. The more effective approach to the spirits, fairies, goblins, ghosts, witches, and devils of the *Faerie Queene* and *Macbeth* is not from modern times, but from pagan times, when Athene dashed down the heights of Olympus and Hermes passed swift as a thought, when Circe transformed men into beasts, and Odysseus descended alive into Hades. If mediaeval literature is approached from modern, it will probably be misapprehended, and, because we have come to smile at superstitions, pupils will take them as lacking in reality, as being merely light and playful fancy. It will be more difficult for them to realize how Shakespeare's audience, who believed in witches and apparitions, looked upon the witches and apparitions in *Macbeth*.

An additional, and a very practical, reason for filling the first years of the high-school course with folk-tales, myths, and mediaeval lore is psychological—that our student in those years is in his early adolescence, when his nature craves the distant and the heroic, though not in the old childish way. If he has been fortunate, his reading books in the grades have supplied him abundantly with fairy tales and myths; it will now be a revelation to him to review them, and view them in the light of literary qualities, and of historical, moral, and religious values. He will find that *Little Red Riding Hood* is a gem of narration and description—vivid, dramatic, condensed, simple, excellent in construction, ingenious in device; he can learn many of his rhetorical terms in the discussion of its beauties. Excellent subjects for exercises in oral composition are selected fairy tales and myths, one presented by each member of the class, and these so planned that they will give, together, ideas of the history and relation of some of the most famous pieces. The English version of *Cinderella* in contrast with the German version presents fundamental agreement, but interesting variations; *Beauty and the Beast* and *Cupid and Psyche* show unexpected relations between fairy tale and myth; *The Sleep-*



*ing Beauty* and *Siegfried Awakening Brunhild* reveal a like relation between fairy tale and tradition of demi-god and hero; *Perseus and Andromeda* and *St. George and the Dragon* show a growth from pagan myth into Christian allegory and will prepare the way for the Red Cross Knight of the *Faerie Queene*.

In the first year's work in the high school, mythology can be, perhaps, best taught incidentally while the *Odyssey* is read, and, if there is time enough, myths of the Northern Cycle and *Hiawatha*, all with a view to their religion and morals as well as to their epic form and spirit. If, like Schliemann, the pupil has been fortunate enough to read a children's version of the tale of "Troy divine" when he was eight years old, believing that there was a Troy, he will return to it with greater interest when he is thirteen, to dig out the sacred citadel and the tomb of Agamemnon with the archaeologist and to penetrate more deeply into the life pictured in the great story. A good exercise is for each pupil to undertake a piece of historical research in a small way, accumulating materials as he reads with a view to presenting them in an essay toward the end, one pupil keeping a list and description of the parts of the palaces, another of all of the furniture mentioned, another of games, another of armor and weapons, others of gods and devotions, all contributing a section to a chapter of history. The *Odyssey* should be discussed as the Bible of the Greeks, with a view to its moral and religious teachings, for unfortunately myths are told in the classical dictionaries with no attempt to reveal the mystic meanings in their depths. Without interpretation, and as mere stories, they and the *Odyssey* come under condemnation in Plato's category of "just casual tales . . . with moral ideas the very opposite of those which are to be held by the children when they are grown up." Not only are unassimilated myths dangerous in this way that Plato pointed out, but without their moral and religious significance they are positively misleading and untrue, for the religious meaning predominated in them and they were believed in to the extent that a man was condemned to the hemlock who discredited them. We should not waste the time and muddle the minds of the children on uninterpreted myths, but teach them (1) as what the Greeks believed and (2) as admirable or not in the light of our own reli-

gion and philosophy. Athene and Apollo, when held to the test, are seen to make for sweetness and light, wisdom and justice; Perseus and Prometheus make for self-devotion and self-sacrifice; but many of the Greek gods make for evil and belong where Milton put them, along with Moloch, Belial, and Satan in the Fiery Lake. Even a young child will grasp the good points in a myth and see in the morals of the bad ones the reason why Greek paganism had to pass away when tried by Christian standards. Which goddess, Athene or Aphrodite, was worth the service of a life? Which queen was the ideal woman? Aphrodite assisted by Ares (there is a profound moral to the relation of these two, for war follows in the service of such love) could not protect Helen after she deserted her husband; Apollo and the Furies raised the hands of her own son against Clytemnestra because she killed her husband, who, it must be admitted, was a cruel and unjust man in his treatment of Achilles and in his sacrifice of his own daughter Iphigenia to his success in war; Heaven rewarded Penelope because she remained true to her wandering spouse through his absence of eighteen years. How did the ideal youth of Homer's time treat his mother? his old nurse? his swineherd? his guests? his friend? his hosts? What did Wisdom require him to do for his father? How did he take up the responsibilities of life? call a meeting, and make a speech? How did he conduct himself on his travels? How did he pray to his gods? How did he treat his father after the return? And Odysseus, who was wise with the wisdom of Athene and not won away by the promise of immortality or the wiles of the beautiful goddess Calypso, but who endured the greatest of trials to return to his faithful wife—was he quite the perfect hero in his character of spoiler of cities? When he slew the less guilty among the suitors who promised to reform their lives and to give ransom, could he in this equal the Christian Knight-Errant, who went forth to right the wrongs of others and granted mercy to a prostrate foe? Will the great Achilles stand that comparison when he denies the prayers of the aged Priam and gives the body of Hector to be mutilated, dragged, and devoured by dogs?

Is such teaching, in motive and result, for the history, or for the literature? Neither is secured without it, and the two seem inseparable, and are secured by it.

## AN OUTLINE OF THE COURSE

It is economical of effort if, in the first year of the high-school course, myths and the *Odyssey*, Plutarch's *Lives*, Macaulay's *Horatius*, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* are read and discussed in class at the time the pupils are studying in history the Greek and Roman periods. While these selections give pagan ideas, they present a good variety of rhetorical types, with material for comment on narration, description, and dramatic presentation; and the study of their literary art can be made the more effective by assigning parallel exercises and essays in composition, some from modern life, some from ancient. One of the best essays by a ninth-grade pupil that I ever read was a monologue, excellent in imitation, poetic, lofty, high and serious in style, on the subject "The Account that Hermes Gave to the Council of the Gods of his Mission to Ogygia"; another was an account in monologue of Odysseus' sailing into the present harbor of New York and experiencing Coney Island, before the fire. For individual reading in this year we may well require some Bible stories from the Old Testament, as (1) Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (how does it compare with Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia?), (2) the bondage of Joseph, (3) the life of Moses, and (4) the wanderings of the children of Israel. Discussion of the *Odyssey* will quicken an interest in the Bible, and pupils will come from this reading with a better vision of the material conditions of ancient life, the motives and the morals involved. For independent reading in this grade I have known pupils to like *Ben Hur*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky*, *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*, *The Blazed Trail*, and *The Riverman*, but some prefer books of a lower grade, *The Little Colonel* stories and books by Henty and Alger still persist. I, for one, should never compel a pupil to finish a book, for home reading, that he did not like. If it cannot hold him, he had better try something else. If it is a good book and he does not like it, he is probably too young for it, and may like it later. If there is a historical element in his book, it is doubly well.

I have written thus fully of the first year's literature to suggest the method for the rest of the course. In the second year many books on mediaeval literature are fit for class reading and discussion, some of them by nineteenth-century writers—Ballads, *The*

*Idylls of the King*, *Sir Launfal*, *The Ancient Mariner*, and *Ivanhoe*. These are sufficient to give a general idea of the Middle Ages, though weak, as I have indicated, in selections from the Continent. To supplement this work, pupils can present to the class as topics in oral composition other stories of phantoms, witches, goblins, fairies of the period. Some excellent stories from the Continent are accessible in the *Tales of the Wayside Inn* and the *Golden Legend*.

A still further advantage can be gained in the third and fourth years of the course by studying English and, finally, American masterpieces, in their periods; and their study will be more effective if a good textbook for reference be adopted on the history of English and American literature. If the *history* instead of the literature is the purpose of the course, and predominates—especially if the literature is *read about*, and not *read*—the study of both the history and the literature will be ineffective; but if the masterpieces are read with a sufficient background of knowledge of the period and the life of the author, not only will their study as literature be more effective, but the history of literature will incidentally be more effectively acquired at the same time. Another advantage in this arrangement of the masterpieces is that if circumstances are favorable a considerable amount of supplementary material can be added, by insertion of additional reading, or by provision for topics to be presented as oral composition. So when the class are considering the drama before reading *Macbeth*, each member of the class can tell the substance of some early dramatic performance.

By a chronological arrangement of pieces from English literature, the first half of the third year will still present mediaeval subjects, though emerging into modern, (1) The *Prologue*, (2) the *Faerie Queene*, and (3) *Macbeth*. Modern tendencies toward reformation and revolution are found in two of the three, as well as new types of composition. The second half of this year will include Milton, Burke, and Burns, with a still more modern spirit and relation to reform and revolution, as well as contribution to literary form.

The first half of the fourth year will include writers of the nineteenth century in England—Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Scott, Macaulay, Dickens, George Eliot, Browning, Tennyson, and as many others as are desired. Pupils will now be old enough and

well enough prepared to do considerable independent reading, which discussion in the class will direct, always attentive alike to spirit and to rhetorical form.

The last half of the year will give still further developments in American literature, the masterpieces for study being the *Farewell Address*, the *Bunker Hill Oration*, and the *House of the Seven Gables*—good examples of the political and social ideals attained, and of fit literary form. A textbook of the history of American literature and an extended system of individual reading will here secure excellent results.

A pupil who has seen his subject presenting matter so vital to his spirit and so practical in its usefulness as literature and composition are capable of being, should come from its study with appreciation of beauty and a consciousness of practical value received. If he does not, it may be that he is at fault; it may be his teacher. Let us see to it that it is no longer his weak and ineffective course.